



# Migration and the European Political Environment

## Paul Rogers

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### Summary

Despite winning a historic fourth term as German Chancellor, Angela Merkel is in her weakest political position yet, having lost millions of votes to the far right. This is likely to further harden Germany's once generous position on admitting refugees and bolster European resolve to securitise migration policy within African states. This may provide a false sense of security that will militate against the much more fundamental policy changes needed to respond properly to the growing problems of economic marginalisation and climate disruption that drive trans-Saharan migration.

### Introduction

While Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) will lead the new German coalition government, the new far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party did far better than expected in the 24 September Bundestag elections. Among other factors, this was a further indication of the political impact of migration into Europe, largely a consequence of the movement of war refugees and others from the Middle East and Africa. However, the AfD's success has actually coincided with a marked decrease in migrant flows in recent months, especially from Africa to Italy. This briefing examines both of these recent developments and questions their long-term impact, especially whether we are witnessing a response to migratory pressures which may involve control in the short-term but be an ineffective response to trends that appear to be global and long term.

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## European Responses to Refugees and Migrants

A consequence of the post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Somalia and elsewhere was a substantial increase in the numbers of often desperate people seeking to move to safer countries. In terms of pressures experienced by receiving countries, the overwhelming majority of refugees, and therefore the greatest challenges, have been experienced by neighbouring countries, especially Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey but also Pakistan and Iran. Movements towards Europe, though much smaller proportionate to host populations, have been more than sufficient to have a pronounced political impact.

This has been most evident in Central Europe, especially Hungary and some Balkan states, but has also been partly responsible for the rise of far-right parties in France, the Netherlands, Denmark and elsewhere in Western Europe. In Britain, where the ratio of asylum-seekers is among the lowest in Europe, the more general issue of migration was one of the most substantial factors that resulted in the Brexit decision. It has also had a major effect in Germany, which has been far more welcoming to asylum-seekers, as shown by the AfD success.

Chancellor Merkel will almost certainly form the next government in the Bundestag, with the CDU/Christian Social Union group (34.7% of seats) at the core of a coalition most likely formed with the liberal Free Democrats (11.3% of seats) and Greens (9.4% of seats). However, the third-place 12.6% of the vote and 94 seats gained by the AfD was a very unpleasant surprise for the ruling parties. This forces the main centre-left party, the Social Democrats, out of grand coalition with the CDU in order to prevent the AfD from becoming the official opposition. While support for the AfD stems from a number of dissatisfactions with German politics, the largest single factor was the decision

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of Merkel's government to admit around 1.5 million asylum-seekers over the prior four years, some 60% of them in 2015 alone.

The rise of the anti-migrant far right across Europe over the last decade has been notable but part of a much more general dissatisfaction with politics and economics reflected in the rise of populist movements of the right and left. In this context there were indications that the specific antagonism to refugees and migrants might have peaked well before the German elections, and what makes this result particularly significant is that it comes at a time when refugee and migrant pressures have actually eased and the overall economic situation for Germans is improving.

## **Patterns of Migration**

The most substantial pressures over the past five years have stemmed from the desperate circumstances of war refugees leaving Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan and Iraq and latterly (though not yet to Europe in large numbers) from South Sudan, Myanmar and the Central African Republic. Eritreans fleeing indefinite military conscription to face-off against Ethiopia also make up a large proportion of refugees in Europe.

The extent of movements to Europe was much diminished last year as a result of accommodations made between the EU and Turkey in March, which has largely halted onward movements into Greece and Bulgaria, but this in no way diminishes the predicament of millions of people trying to rebuild lives in the neighbouring countries, often in huge refugee camps. For European governments, though, this both eased their problem while putting much greater focus on people trying to cross the Mediterranean, mainly from Libya into Italy but increasingly from Morocco to Spain.

While some of this flow is war-displaced, especially from the Horn of Africa and northern Nigeria, there has been a much longer-term trend of people often described as economic migrants trying to get to Europe, mainly from West Africa. Long directed towards Spain via Morocco, this flow turned decisively towards Libya from about 2007. Even in Gaddafi's day, the Libyan government was able to extract resources from European governments to reduce the flow towards southern Europe but when his regime was terminated and the state collapsed into warlordism and widespread instability the numbers increased substantially.

Over the past six years, the management of migrants has proved to be a highly lucrative business for people smugglers, many of them rooted in militias that maintain distinct areas of territorial control, especially in the coastal towns and cities such as Sabratha and Zuwara between Tripoli and the western border with Tunisia. Here, too, and especially in the past three months, there has been a marked decline in movements. In recent years it has tended to be the month of August which sees the largest numbers, but the decline this year has been quite remarkable with some 4,500 people coming ashore in Italy compared with 21,000 last year.

There are several reasons for this. One is that trafficking in people is highly profitable but the smuggling of subsidised petroleum and other oil-based products have become particularly lucrative and for some militias this has reportedly overshadowed earnings from people trafficking. Secondly, Italy has been providing direct aid to improve coast guard functions, especially in the Sabratha/Zuwara area. Thirdly, Italy has loudly discouraged international NGOs from operating rescue boats from its ports, increasing the known risk for migrants taking the journey. Fourthly, although this is stoutly denied by the

Italian government, a number of analysts believe that there has been payment, possibly via the weak Government of National Accord, to warlords to discourage them from trafficking.

There may be other factors involved further from the Libyan coast, including the spread of the civil war to migrant routes in central and south-west Libya, where Italy has been buying support from local tribal leaders and their militia. Since last year the EU has hugely increased aid to Sudan – whose government is variously accused of genocide, war crimes and sponsoring terrorism – in return for action to deter or detain East African migrants en route to Libya. France’s military has been reinforcing its attempts to police the Sahelian routes into Libya via Niger and Chad and plans a network of “hot spot” refugee processing centres within Libya. President Macron, joined by Merkel and leaders of Italy and Spain, hosted a summit in Paris to coordinate aid for these countries’ border control efforts last month. An EU mission in Niger (EUCAP Sahel) has also been training the Nigerien security sector to clamp down on illegal migration.

However, there have also been major concerns raised by human rights groups about the impact of the changes. These revolve around the estimated 400,000 potential migrants and refugees already in Libya. Many thousands of them end up in detention camps run by militia groups where conditions can be extremely poor and the detainees are subject to hardship and abuse. Pope Francis has called them “concentration camps”; others have compared them to slave markets. Running such detention facilities, some funded by European states such as the UK, is an increasingly important part of the Libyan political economy, as it is in Mali, Niger, Chad and Sudan. UN agencies and others have

been receiving rather more financial aid but still complain that the problem stems from the unwillingness of Europeans to seek longer-term solutions.

## **The Global Context**

The European experience and reaction in recent years should be seen in a global context. Firstly, there are strong migration pressures in many parts of the world. These range from relatively small movements from southern Africa into South Africa, through persistent attempts by migrants from parts of South and South East Asia to gain entry into Australia and movements from Bangladesh into India, right through to long-term movements from Central America into the United States and from Central Asia into Russian cities. In many cases the reaction of the receiving states has become steadily more hostile, notable recent examples being Australia and the United States. The former has taken to detaining its asylum-seekers on bankrupt Pacific island states, while the latter aims to fence off the entire US/Mexico border.

While there have been very many examples of migration throughout history, there would appear to be two factors driving the current trends. One is the increasing marginalisation of many millions of people who have at least a basic education and are aware both of their own poverty of opportunity and the relative wealth of other regions. It is not that the poor are getting poorer but that the very welcome improvements in education, literacy and communications mean that far more people, especially under the age of 30, are aware of their predicament.

It is not easy to see how this can improve given that the neoliberal economic system is singularly better at delivering growth than equity and there is little sign of the system being challenged let alone transformed into something more

equitable. In any case, a second factor may overtake this in importance. This is the growing impact of climate disruption resulting from increased carbon emissions. While there are very welcome improvements in renewable energy technologies, even the best-case scenarios indicate that the next two to three decades will see a pronounced impact on temperatures and rainfall across most of the tropical and sub-tropical regions. The substantial problems that will follow this are likely to include serious disruption to food production and much greater damage from severe weather events, both doing much to increase migratory pressures.

This means that recent European attempts to reduce such pressures in the short term are essentially defensive and there is every chance that these will lead to the mistaken belief that nothing more substantial needs to be done. Thus, not only are there immediate human consequences of current policies, especially in Libya and Sudan, but an added problem of a false sense of security which will militate against the much more fundamental policy changes needed to respond properly to a growing problem.

## **Conclusion**

The strong performance of the German far-right is far from unprecedented in recent European elections and proof that fear of migrants and Muslims is widespread in Europe's leading economy. While the AfD is still further from power than many right-populist parties in neighbouring countries, or indeed the United States, the election makes it significantly more likely that Berlin will henceforth toe the same hard line as Rome, Paris, London and Madrid in reinforcing Europe's firewall against migration and funding whichever African and Middle Eastern strongmen will bid to interdict the flows of people. This would be a lost opportunity for principled European leadership in the



neighbouring Sahel-Sahara, which is fast becoming a securitised outer frontier of the fortified Union.

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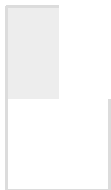
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